



# TOOLS of the Trade

**A**s any handyman will tell you, there are some tools that no toolbox should be without. These include—at the minimum—a hammer, two screwdrivers (one Phillips, one flathead), a pair of pliers, a wrench set, and a tape measure. And when it comes to your oral health, there are a few tools that come in very handy, as well. In order to keep your teeth and gums as healthy as possible, you'll want to make sure your dental toolbox is stocked with the right tools.

## Toothbrush

Like the hammer, the toothbrush is the centerpiece of any dental arsenal. For healthy teeth and gums, you should brush with fluoride toothpaste (more on that in a minute) a minimum of twice a day for at least two minutes. Make sure you use a soft-bristled brush because hard-bristled brushes can be too harsh on your enamel and gums. You can use a manual toothbrush, which is economical and comes in all sorts of fun colors, or an electric or power toothbrush, which can be a little pricier—depending on how fancy you want to go, there are affordably priced electric- and battery-powered toothbrushes available—but that have some neat features, like timers that let you know when you've brushed for two minutes or popular song clips that play while you brush. Whichever type you prefer, the important thing is that you brush. You'll want to replace your toothbrush every three months, or sooner if the bristles are frayed. (A good way of remembering when to change your toothbrush is to begin to use a new one with the start of each season.) A worn-out toothbrush won't do a good job of cleaning your teeth. And don't forget to brush your tongue. The tongue can be a hotbed for bacteria, which can lead to halitosis (bad breath). And nobody wants that.

## Toothpaste

Essential to your daily oral hygiene routine, toothpastes are pastes, gels, or powders that help remove plaque, a film of bacteria that forms on teeth and gums. Toothpaste improves the mechanical brushing and cleaning power of a toothbrush. However, you shouldn't use just any toothpaste. You want to make sure you're brushing with a fluoride toothpaste that has the American Dental Association (ADA) Seal of Approval. Fluoride is an important mineral. Research has shown that fluoride reduces cavities in both children and adults, and it helps repair the early stages of tooth decay even before the decay becomes visible. Fluoride has been proven to strengthen tooth enamel and remineralize tooth decay. All ADA-Accepted toothpastes contain fluoride. While some toothpastes may be flavored, it should be noted that no ADA-Accepted toothpaste contains sugar or any other ingredient that would promote tooth decay. Stannous fluoride and triclosan, ingredients that can be found in some toothpastes, have also been shown to help reduce gingivitis, a mild inflammation of the gum tissue, according to the ADA. Some toothpastes also contain ingredients, such as potassium nitrate or strontium chloride, to help reduce tooth sensitivity.

## Dental Floss

Think of floss as your friend—a friend you can wrap around your finger. The sooner you realize this, the better. And if the toothbrush is the hammer of the dental toolbox, the stringy stuff may be considered the screwdriver. You should clean between your teeth daily with dental floss (dental tape) or an interdental cleaner (see above, right). Decay-causing bacteria still linger between teeth where toothbrush bristles can't reach. Floss helps remove plaque and food particles from between the teeth and under the gum line. Floss is available in two forms: waxed or unwaxed. There is no difference

in the effectiveness of either type. The wax issue is more one of personal choice, so you should buy the type of floss that you will be more likely to use. Some floss may be treated with flavoring agents, such as mint, to make flossing more pleasant. Timing is everything, though, according to the ADA. If you floss before you brush, the fluoride from the toothpaste actually has a better chance of reaching between teeth. Also, you'll want to be sure not to reuse dental floss; used floss might fray, lose its effectiveness, or deposit bacteria in the mouth.

## Interdental Cleaners

Performing the same function as dental floss, interdental cleaners are special wooden or plastic picks, sticks, or brushes that are used to clean between teeth. They are not as pliable as dental floss, but as with toothbrushes, personal preference is the key here. If you find it easier to use an interdental cleaner pick, go for it. The important thing is that you clean between your teeth every day to get rid of any plaque that your toothbrush can't reach.

## Mouthrinses

Antimicrobial mouthrinses reduce the bacterial count and inhibit bacterial activity in dental plaque, which can cause gingivitis, an early, reversible form of periodontal (gum) disease. Fluoride mouthrinses help reduce and prevent tooth decay. According to the ADA, clinical studies have demonstrated that use of a fluoride mouthrinse and fluoride toothpaste can provide extra protection against tooth decay over that provided by fluoride toothpaste alone. Fluoride mouthrinses are not recommended for children age 6 or younger because they may swallow the rinse. You should always check the manufacturer's label for precautions and age recommendations, and talk with your dentist about the use of this plaque fighter in your dental toolbox.

While you'll want to make sure you have all of the above oral hygiene tools in your toolbox (okay, your bathroom cabinet), there's one other very important item you'll want to make sure you add: your telephone. Make sure you call your dentist to schedule a checkup and cleaning every six months. Combined, these tools will all help you reach optimum oral health. 



For more information on your oral health, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit our Web site at [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).